6,000 Journalists Censure Media's Ethnic Sterotyping
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Atlanta, Georgia. The tables were turned, for a change. Journalists, usually the invisible chroniclers of someone else's news, were the news. Suddenly, we found ourselves on the opposite side of someone else's camera, microphone and reporter's notebook. Almost 6,000 of us had gathered for the Unity Convention at the Georgia World Congress Center July 28-July 31. Remarkably, all of us were journalists "of color"-all hues of brown, black, red and yellow. Big minority journalism groups came in force-the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ), National Black Journalists (NABJ), Native American Journalists Association and Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA) had come together for the first time in the history of American media to share our common concerns and revitalize our common bond.

We came from all over America, from the newsrooms of big dailies, weeklies and small monthlies (organizers worked hard to be sure Hindusim Today was there) as well as major broadcasting and TV stations.

The event, called "Unity 94," was six years in the making and, just in terms of size and flare, spectacular. The ambience was charged with a oneness of spirit and tremendous vitality. A sea of enthusiastic faces eager to reach out to others and reach up with a go-getter attitude, participated in hundreds of seminars and workshops arranged by the press associations. All the nation's major publishing houses and TV and broadcast networks were present too, casting the bait for fresh and seasoned talent.

It is noteworthy that we caught the attention of the President of the United States, Bill Clinton. Slated to attend the event, he was unable to come in person at the last minute but, via satellite from the White House, he spoke to us. His face beaming from two huge screens in front of the 4,500 strong audience, he said, "I have proved beyond question that you can have diversity. So if it as true for the US government, it ought to be true for the American press as well." Glamorous Chinese broadcasting anchor woman Connie Chung moderated his address. She is so articulate and elegant, her shining presence at the Presidential level was a big thrill for all of us. Incidentally, Chung-nee Constance Yu-hwa Chung-has long been (she is now 48) a jewel-like role model for many aspiring Asian journalists, me included.

Minorities today comprise 25% of the US population but only 10.5% of the newsroom employees. Lack of representation in the newsroom is the prime cause of biased and inadequate coverage about the minorities' issues. Because of this under-representation, the American media are more often than not baffled about Hindu religion and culture and tend to think of minorities in terms of stereotypes.

Debunking stereotypes and establishing correct images of our vivid and varied cultures was one of the purposes of the convention. To this end, AAJA had organized a seminar titled, "Terrorists, Reincarnation, Freaks and Weird Mystics: Debunking Stereotypes About Asian Religions." The panelists at this session were: myself representing Hinduism; Thailand-born community activist Nampet Panichpant representing Buddhism; and Muslim public affairs Council official Salam Almarayati representing Islam. Cecil Holmes-White, the religion editor for the Houston Chronicle, moderated the event while Prof. John Fenton of the Department of Religion at the Emory University presented an overall view of religions in the US.

Although Al-Marayati's namaj and loud, sonorous lslamic prayers outside the seminar room just before the beginning did turn some heads in our direction, we were all disappointed at the meager turnout of less than 50 people for our religion session. Still, there were some editors and reporters covering this event.

I was the first speaker. As part of my presentation, I had set up a little altar at the panelists' table, complete with a shining one-foot tall Ganesh with flowers, incense and a traditional silver lamp with a lit flame. I began with a mini-puja and a Sanskrit prayer. My allocated time of fifteen minutes was too short to cover such a vast and profound subject like Hinduism. However I carried the audience from Swami Vivekananda's first visit to America and his address to the Parliament of

Religions in Chicago on Sept. 11, 1893. I told them how this was an epoch-making event because it was the first introduction of Hinduism to the US. I also delineated the major beliefs of Hinduism and shared that one sixth of the world's population is Hindu, that there are 700,000 Hindus and 800 shrines and ashrams in the US and 300,000 Hindus in Canada. I addressed the issue of biased coverage of Hindu news and issues, giving examples of the distorted US media reports on Ramjanma Bhoomi issue as well as the Kashmir situation.

In offering constructive comments and guidelines to the journalists for better reporting of the news and issues of the Hindu world, I emphasized that media people should first gain a rudimentary understanding of the complex linguistic, political and social structure of India. As an example, I explained that the word "secular" for Indians does not just mean just "separation of church and state" but rather has a whole lot of different connotations such as the situation in India where more rights and privileges are often extended to non-Hindu schools and non-Hindu places of worship than to Hindu schools and places of worship.

Ms. Holmes-White said that in a study of 18 different categories of news, religion rated very high-below education and food sections, but above the arts, entertainment and even sports sections. She said that newspapers presently without a religion editor should appoint one. She added that there are journalists of color in many newsrooms, and their cultural experience and savvy should be more often sought out by other writers and editors. "The Protestant Christians, although influential and important, are no longer the strongest religious force in the US today," she said. "There is a mosaic of religions and the Asian religions are here to stay."

Speaking on Buddhism, Panichpant made everyone sit in a circle and chatted with them, telling that Buddhism evolved out of Hinduism, borrowing some of their concepts and refining them, and that this year is the 2,537th in the era of Buddhism. "Buddhism is essence-centered and not form centered," she explained, "and one of the principle tenets is ahimsa-not harming anyone including oneself." She shared that poor media coverage of Thais results from the fact that many Thai people (who comprise a major part of the US Buddhist population) do not speak good English, unlike Indians, according to her. There are an estimated 3-6 million Buddhists in the US.

Al-Marayati lamented that in the US Islam is usually associated with terrorism.

"We are not sympathizes of Saddam Hussein or Ayatollah Khomeni," he said emphatically. "We do not hava a political or national structure. We are 'just a bunch of mosques.' We have not been able to create a non-political, real, honest to goodness image of Islam," he concluded.

Back in 1978, when the minorities comprised 23% of the US population, they made up only 3.9% of US newsrooms. The American Society Newspaper Editors set a goal to make the American newsrooms mirror the minority populations by the year 2,000. Today, 16 years later, minorities make up 10.5% of the newsroom staff, while they are now 26% of the nation's population. ASNE admits that the progress is slow, and it might take them 10 to 15 years more to reach the goal.

One of many resolutions passed at the convention was that Native American Indian mascot names should not be used by the newspapers while referring to the sport teams such as Atlanta Braves and Washington Redskins. Portland-based The Oregonian has already adopted that policy.

In the closing ceremony, an outspoken Dorothy Butler Gilliam, president of the National Association of Black Journalists, commented, "The mainstream media is using us like crayons-once in a while they will pick up a brown crayon, or a black one, or a yellow or red one, but that is like a mere decoration and not a representation."